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**You Gotta Light?:
On the Luxury of Context for Understanding Talk in Interaction**

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Abstract

To deal with some current debates about the analytic validity of ‘contextual’ details in the analysis of talk-in-interaction, we (Alec McHoul and Mark Rapley) work through two cases. The first is hypothetical and derives from the current literature in speech-act-theory-inspired pragmatics (Capone, 2005). The second is actual and arises from our initial disagreement with an earlier publication by one of our colleagues (Charles Antaki [1998]). What we hope to show is that the idea of context is, itself, something of a moveable feast; that it can have multiple formations ranging from the broadly political to the almost-but-not-quite effect of surface texts and their sequential implications. In this respect, we hope to ease tensions between otherwise cognate approaches to the analysis of talk-in-interaction. Our argument is that, if context is hearable in the talk as such, then it cannot be ignored by analysts. In the third section of the paper (and precisely so as not to make this a ‘contestation’), Charles responds in his own terms and to see what kind of mutual footing there may (or may not) be for all involved in the analysis of talk vis-à-vis questions of context. If there is an upshot of the paper as a whole it is that further work on the ‘context question’ in studies of talk-in-interaction could well entail a return to (and perhaps a respecification of) the

foundational ethnomethodological question of the status of ‘members’ knowledge’.

You Gotta Light?: On the Luxury of Context for Understanding Talk in Interaction

1. Contextual Background and Capone’s Gloss

In recent years, there have been a number of quite celebrated debates in conversation and discourse analysis (CA/DA) about the relevance of contextual information for understanding stretches of talk.¹ Briefly, and at the risk of oversimplification, the key protagonists propose two more-or-less incommensurable positions. Firstly, those favouring one variety or another of what we can respectfully call ‘sequential purism’ contend that the notion of ‘context’ is so highly overdetermined as to offer nothing but an indefinite regress of analytic glosses, with no principled manner of reaching an empirically secure determination of the locally relevant aspects of a conversational scene (see Antaki, 1998; Potter, 1998; Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999a,b). Secondly, those who may claim allegiance to critical discourse analysis or versions of critical realism contend that those aspects of ‘context’ which are essential to comprehending talk-in-interaction (and which most frequently come in the guise of the usual macro-sociological suspects: racism, heterosexism, disablism, and so forth) — are not only accountably deleted by the sequential purists, but are also identifiable, *a priori*, by otherwise astute and socio-politically committed analysts (see Fairclough, 1992; Parker, 1992; Parker & Burman, 1993; Willig, 1999). Leaving to one side attempts to marry discourse analysis and cognitive psychology (e.g. Van Dijk, 1999), between the pro- and anti-context polarities some have attempted to outline a

¹ We note, however, that recent discussions are in many ways recapitulations of earlier debates in ethnomethodology (EM). See, for example Heritage (1984) and Wieder (1974).

middle way; a way of eschewing 'either-or' thinking in favour of a 'both-and' approach: that is to say, a way of reading ethnomethodology (EM) generally, and CA in particular, in terms of either rhetorical analysis or post-structuralist thought, and vice versa (see Billig, 1999a,b; Rapley, 2004; Wetherell, 1998; 1999). In this respect, Mey's consideration of the *co-dependence* of what he calls "co-text" and context remains instructive (Mey, 1999: 181-191).

Alessandro Capone (2005) poses an interesting puzzle for these debates about the relevance of contextual information for analytic understandings of stretches of talk. He writes:

Two persons meet in the street. They know each other. Once they were friends; then they stopped being on speaking terms. One of them talks to the other. We need not know the specific literal content of his utterance. However, we know how to understand his message — it counts as an attempt to resume the old friendship. (Capone, 2005: 1355-1356)

The upshot of what we might call 'Capone's gloss' is that the understanding of a stretch of talk is not always available from the literality of the transcript as such — *pace* some of the above-mentioned positions within CA. It can be just as much or equally in the scene, its history, how the participants stand with respect to each other, and so forth, through a long list of possible contextual — perhaps even biographical — specifics. The basic message of ethnomethodology (EM) from its earliest days has always been: each mutually informs the other. The specific, *in situ*, context makes the utterance make sense and the utterance is (at least partly) constitutive of that local scene. Context (or scene) then can't be forgotten as part of the overall reflexive equation — though, as we will see, it need not be the only weapon in the analyst's arsenal.

So, on the other hand, and equally importantly, the ‘sequence grammar’ (Sacks, 1970) of a stretch of talk can tell us much about the scene. Compare hypothetical instances of Capone’s gloss:²

*Materials 1

A: You gotta light?

B: F*** off you! ((stares A down))

A: ((walks away))

A: You gotta light?

B: Still not talking.

A: You gotta light?

((long pause))

B: Yeh sure ((offers light)) ‘bout time we made up, eh?

A: You gotta light?

B: John, me old mate! Sure!

In any of these cases, each second (return) utterance can give us some pretty good clues as to the kind of scene we’re dealing with.³ Put shortly: if the first utterance could be an “attempt to resume the old friendship”, the second is more or less limited to acceptance or refusal.⁴ Upon finding (say, in a transcript) something

² The asterisk shows invented or hypothetical data. In the second section of this paper we will consider a case from an actual instance of talk-in-interaction.

³ Note that Capone does not consider possible return utterances. In this respect, he is not so much interested in how a conversation proceeds as in giving an example of a somewhat humorous story. Capone deals with a more obviously conversational instance in a later paper (Capone, 2006).

⁴ Here we must write “if...” because, despite Capone’s insistence, it is possible that the first speaker could begin with an utterance much less benignly open to being an offer than “You gotta light?”. As the instance is hypothetical — for both Capone and ourselves

hearable as an acceptance or a refusal, we can hear the utterance before as an offer of some sort. The *exact* contextual standing of the participants is not directly written on the surface of the paired utterances; but it is not so far from our analytic grasp on a purely sequentialist reading. It is also the case that, at least in Anglophone cultures, if the first utterance is to be an “attempt to resume the old friendship”, it could not *but* be of the ‘pick up line’ variety of pre-request such as “You gotta light?”, or “Is that today’s *Times*?” which can propose much more than the simple provision of a match or a newspaper.⁵

So, in these hypothetical examples, we have a nice analytic question on our hands. That is, the first utterance, in each case, is formally formed as a *request* (for a light), but turns out, after the second utterance, to be retrospectively hearable as an *offer* (to resume a friendship). The speech-acts of offer and request are, if not quite antithetical to one another, then at least formally distinct. Offers propose giving something while requests want something to be given.

As a caution we should note that offers and requests nevertheless have one thing in common: both can be accepted or rejected. But acceptances and rejections of offers are quite different and distinct from acceptances and rejections of requests. That is, typical acceptances or rejections of requests, as opposed to offers, would run much more along the following lines (to repeat our example):

— we could imagine any number of openings that would actually deepen the division between the two (ex) friends rather than offering an olive branch.

⁵ Our thanks to Susan Hansen for this point. On another note, one of the reviewers of this paper for *Journal of Pragmatics* speculates as follows — with some slight alterations by the present authors not affecting the overall sense of the comment:

I would think that, in Romance cultures, utterances such as “Have you gotta light?” are not very efficient for resuming friendships. For settling serious quarrels, more serious utterances that seem to attend to very serious business would do the job best. For example, after ten years, John phones his sister: “Hi, this is John. Dad’s dead”. I am not completely persuaded that Anglophone cultures are so very different. If they are, much could be said in a further paper.

We are contemplating such a comparative analysis and, should the anonymous reviewer care to be involved in the project, we would be pleased to collaborate with her or him.

*Materials 2

A: You gotta light?

B: Sorry, I don't smoke.

A: You gotta light?

B: Sure ((takes out lighter and lights A's cigarette))

Still, in our original bunch of cases of offers (*Materials 1), the first turn, "You gotta light?", looks like nothing other than a request. The analyst's question is then: how could what looks like a request on first turn actually turn out to be an offer after second turn? Do we need all the florid details of A's and B's mutual biography to decide? Our response will be that we don't quite *need* it (if we have the second turns empirically to hand) but it could be an analytic luxury that seals the case.

So how is it that we can read utterances like "You gotta light?" as offers rather than requests? As we have seen, one way is to turn to what follows them and find these 'seconds' to be acceptances or rejections of offers rather than as acceptances or rejections of requests, each of which, as we have seen are formed quite differently. Another means is via a machinery (as Sacks often called it) available to pretty much any competent member. That is, pairs of persons such as FRIEND + FRIEND are just one instance of a collection of pair-kinds or "standardised relational pairs". Sacks (1972) calls this kind a Collection R. In such a collection, each member of the pair is co-equal in terms of any possible exchange. Therefore STUDENT + STUDENT is a Collection R while TEACHER + STUDENT is not. Sacks calls the latter type of pair a Collection K: where the members of it are not co-equal.

The interesting thing about acceptances (as against rejections) of offers to resume friendships is that they re-establish the pair as a Collection R while rejections introduce the possibility of a rather peculiar Collection K such as FRIEND +

STRANGER. That is: speaker A proposes the resumption of a Collection R which previously existed (FRIEND + FRIEND) which B can either take up with an acceptance or refuse with a rejection, thereby proposing himself as (continuing to be) a stranger despite A's offer. As ordinary speakers of the language, then, equipped in general with the Collection R vs. Collection K distinction, we can infer the paired collectional status of the parties so long as we are (minimally) given the first and second turns. Accordingly the reasonable inferences about the first turn(s) in *Materials 1 are:

1. These two people must know each other; and independently of any name-based recognition.
2. Their relation to each other is currently undecidable as to its Collection status.
3. It may once have been co-equal (Collection R) but has been broken at some prior point, thereby coming under the aegis of Collection K.
4. The offer is very likely aimed at repairing the absence of co-equality — via an ordinary request — an attempt to re-establish the pair as a Collection R.
5. It can then be accepted or refused.
6. If accepted, Collection R status is resumed.
7. If rejected, an uneasy Collection K status is continued — uneasy since one of the pair wants the pair to have Collection R status while the other does not.

So the sequence grammar — especially in conjunction with commonsense knowledge of standardised relational pairs — can get us to a very reasonable approximation of the kind of scene this is, indeed of the likely sequential details of it, independently of any general (e.g., biographical) context supplied by Capone's gloss.⁶ On the other hand, if we *happen* to know in advance what kind of scene this is — via 'extraneous' contextual knowledge — the niceties of sequential and collectional inference effectively disappear.

⁶ Cf. Sacks's analysis of similar kinds of inference from the relations between *utterance* sequences and the hearable sequentiality of the *events* they describe. Sacks (1992a: 113).

Putting this shortly: there is no point in gazing at single utterances without considering their place in their local sequence of utterances, thereby relying purely on the context (independently of what was actually uttered) in order to understand a stretch of talk. That is, Capone's gloss is a useful instruction to analysts but its indifference to the sequential placement of talked items limits its methodological applicability for our purposes. Equally, there is no point in relying on a purely sequential analysis if the details of the context happen to be independently available in some obviously, i.e., empirically, ascertainable manner.

If our goal is to understand and faithfully describe the pragmatics of utterance *exchange*, then we have to assume that the two must mutually inform each other – in Garfinkel's (1967) original sense of reflexivity. For the analyst, then, contextual knowledge is by no means necessary but, as a luxury, it need not be rejected out of hand if verifiably available. The debates about the relevance of context for the understanding of stretches of talk, to date (see above), have been couched in somewhat 'either-or' terms, as we have noted. For all this, 'both-and' is not an unreasonable alternative and is not incompatible with formally scientific methodology. If zoologists, for example, can mutually analyse both captured (filmed and transcribed) instances of animal behaviour *and* their empirically documented environmental determinants and consequences, why should analysts of human talk not work in a parallel manner?

Another way of stating our position on this is to say that single utterances (or turns) can rarely be particularly interesting – in the analytic sense – in their own right. "Have you gotta light?", to return to the manufactured example that Capone's gloss invites, has multiple analytic possibilities if taken on its own; and interpretations of it as 'request' or 'offer' are only two from a long list of possibilities. Capone draws our attention to the ways in which *supra-local* contextual information (the mutual biographies of the interlocutors) can seal the analytic reading. Attention to the possible next turns can give us almost (but not

quite) the same analytic definiteness about the utterance. But, in another sense, inspecting the following turn is but another instance of context in action — except that, in this eventuality, we are dependent on purely *local* context. The conclusion, at least for analysts, must then be that context (in some form or other) is inevitable. For (transcript-dependent) purists this will be the local sequential context. For others it will be the supra-local context — perhaps even to the point of going beyond Capone's biographical information and venturing into the broader realm of what might be called 'politics'.

Either way, very few free-standing utterances can be analytically illuminating. Any given instance inevitably depends on one or another version of what can very loosely be called 'context'. How far we extend our analytic conception of context, we suspect, depends on the instance in question. But, unless we remain with some kind of a 'unit' (as per quantitative analysis), one or another version of context is inevitable. To show this in the case of some actually videotaped and transcribed materials, we will now consider how a single term or name, *Fagin*, can be — and has been — read by analysts.

2. *Fagin and Friends*

Charles Antaki (1998:71) offers an intriguing analysis of an instance of jocular identity ascription: "you look like Fagin" — i.e., bedraggled. One possible analytic take is that "this sort of identity talk is meant to be non-literal, and therefore — apparently — invokes things not there in the recorded talk ... [so it] must play on 'culture', and perhaps on people's 'private meanings'". Charles wants to argue against this take and writes that what *Fagin* indexes:

need[s] neither psychological speculation nor cultural interpretation to understand it.... [E]ven though the tease seems to invoke the cultural nugget of a fictional character name ("Fagin") the ... work it does [an

appreciation of a complaint] is hearable and intelligible without resort to any sort of 'cultural' or 'psychological' analysis, where the former means something like the interpretation of a code and the latter means the evaluation of inner states (p. 71).⁷

We have no quarrel with Charles's gloss on the work done here by the utterance "you look like Fagin" but note that while, here, identity mis-ascription does affiliation via the appreciation of a complaint rather than doing insult (cf. Sacks's analysis of the work done by the kinship misidentification "Yes Mommy" in the GTS data), as we have argued elsewhere (McHoul & Rapley 2001), one has to know the *cultural* as well as the *sequential* rules for the doing of affiliation or insult via this device (or in Sacks's terms, a "cultural machinery") in order to accountably produce the practice *as such*.

But let us look at Charles's data. They are prefaced by the following 'contextual'(!) information: that the interaction is "the beginning of one of a number of mundane episodes that a colleague of mine videotaped in her home as a favour to me. I gave no specific instructions about when or what to tape, nor did I say what I was looking for other than (as was indeed the case) that I wanted some stretches of everyday interaction 'to look over'" (1998:72). It is drawn, then, from what is characterised as a piece of "mundane ... everyday interaction"; that is an episode which both Lyn, his colleague, and Charles know as such, for without their shared cultural knowledge of what variety of interactional episode constitutes the 'mundane' and 'everyday' as opposed to, say, the 'melodramatic', 'spectacular' or 'unusual', he (and we) would have no data to work with.

⁷ In passing we note that, once again, here we see the familiar (and, for us, fruitless) oppositional binary between 'culture' and 'the self'. Cf. McHoul & Rapley (2005) where we argue that anything counting as a 'self' is an effect of local, occasioned, socio-cultural possibilities. As our argument is strongly anti-psychological in any traditional sense, we have to agree with Charles Antaki that neither ordinary speakers nor analysts need "psychological" readings of "private meanings" (p. 71). However, this does not preclude — in fact, it makes more urgent — the need for a sophisticated conception of culture and its operations *in and as* forms of talk and text.

Materials 3: From Antaki (1998: 72-3)⁸

(Up till now the videotape has shown Lyn in a domestic interior at a table reading and writing for some ten minutes)⁹

1 ((door? faintly, off camera))
2 (6 secs)
3 Zoe: ((off camera)) Mum?
4 Lyn: ↑hel↓lo:
5 (3 secs)
6 Lyn: I'm ↑he:↓re (...)
7 Zoe: °o°kay- (...)
8 Lyn: ((coughs/clears throat))
9 ((off camera: three ?crockery bangs for 2 secs))
10 (3 secs)
11 ((door opens, Zoe appears))=
12 Zoe: =↑hel↓lo↑::
13 Lyn: ↑hi:: (.)
14 Zoe: ↑where's the ci[gar↓ettes:
15 [((Zoe shuts door behind her))
16 (1 sec)
17 Lyn: °in the° ↑kitchen:
18 ...
19 Lyn: °in the° ↑kitchen:
20 (6 secs) ((in which Zoe comes and stands facing Lyn across the table))
21 Zoe: °the° ↑camera's ↓on
22 Lyn: =y↑e:s (...)
23 Zoe: are ↓you ↑t(hh)alk↓ing t(h)o it ↑while y(h)ou wO::RK?
24 Lyn: ↓n(h)o:: (...) [heh heh-
25 Zoe: [hh what (h)ye ↑DO:Ing ↓then=
26 Lyn: =hahh hahh hahh
27 (1 sec)
28 ((Zoe starts to move off))
29 Zoe: ↓what's the ↑poin:t: ((moves out off camera towards kitchen))
30 (1.5 sec)
31 Zoe: ((off camera and out of sight of Lyn)) oh ↑g::od (.) look what ↑I'm wear↓ing=
32 Lyn: =((explosive laugh)) >ehh [hehh hehh hehh<
33 Zoe: [hehh hehh
34 Lyn: ↓you ↑look ↓like ↑Fa:↓gin=
35 Zoe: hahh ha [ha
36 Lyn: [ha hahh [↑↑huh ((very high pitched at end))
37 Zoe: [↑↑hh ↓maybe I ↑am
38 Lyn: (1 sec) ((in which Lyn starts to mimic pulling gloves on / off))
39 Lyn: we ↑just ↓need the ↑little ↓glov:es with the ↑fingers ↓out
40 Zoe: °↑very funny°

⁸ Note that the lines marked as 17 and 18 are identical. We have altered some details of the transcript so that it conforms more exactly with the standard Jeffersonian notation.

⁹ Charles Antaki tells us that in the extracts, which are reproduced as published, the (..) symbols were meant to represent pauses of about .5 of a second, and ought not to have been left at the end of speakers' lines; he has an updated transcript, accompanying the videotape of the episode, online at <<http://www-staff.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/trans4.htm>>

40 (1 sec)
41 Zoe: °(d'you want one)°

{{Note to typesetter:
Please vertically align square brackets marked in blue}}

Perhaps the first point to make about the ascription of the identity *Fagin* to Zoe by Lyn, is that it is part of a *side-sequence*. The substantive business at hand is the filming of 'everyday life', with a secondary (and amusingly in the light of our invented data) shared activity in the finding of cigarettes. The hunt for the smokes begins in line 14 with Zoe's query about their whereabouts, and is resolved with her offering one to Lyn in line 41. All of the material in between is, then, a marked departure from the main business of the talk.

Referring to lines 39-41 of the transcript, Charles points out, quite correctly, that Zoe receives Lyn's *Fagin* remark (about her, Zoe's, shabby appearance) as jocular or playful (1998: 79-80) and that she then quickly moves on to "a different topic": "d'you want one", i.e., a cigarette (p. 79). What he apparently doesn't quite see is that this is not a "different topic", but rather is a continuation of the topic left off earlier at line 14 – "where's the cigarettes?", "in the kitchen". This shows the whole of the passage from "the camera's on?" to "very funny" (lines 20-39) as being marked, by the participants, and for the analyst, as a clearly audible side sequence. (Noting that "this stretch is neatly topped and tailed by the participants" doesn't seem quite to capture the import of the sequence grammar.) To that extent, what Charles's sequential analysis under-emphasises is the larger sequential status of the *Fagin* business: it's done as a side sequence and, thereby, specifically *not* as the main business at hand: recording "some stretches of everyday interaction" for Charles "to look over" (1998: 72).

One characteristic of side sequences is that they may 'formulate' aspects of the context in which the 'main business' (here: recording chunks of everyday life with a camera) is getting done. That is, side sequences can point to incidental contextual features outwith the main business of the talk in hand. They can note

any somewhat peripheral features of the scene. Hence Charles's description of the *Fagin* exchange as jocular or playful. As such, then, we should hear it that, during the side sequence, the participants are giving themselves licence to do explicitly non-serious work: for example, to mime or to mimic, to make extra-business-as-usual remarks. In this case, these have to do with being (or not being) suitably dressed for an analyst's loosely pre-specified on-camera event.

Throughout his analysis, Charles seems to equivocate between glossing Zoe's remark "look what I'm wearing" as being a self-deprecation (about being dressed shabbily) and as being a complaint (about being *caught on camera* in such a shabby state). Sometimes it counts (analytically) as one, sometimes as the other, sometimes as both. Could this analytic hesitation have to do with the side-sequential nature of the whole exchange? That is, a side-sequence allows its makers to engage in things such as self-deprecation and complaining interchangeably, non-seriously and, as it were, 'for a laugh'. The audible parentheses around it ("Where's the cigarettes?" / "In the kitchen" ... "Do you want one?") — in Charles' words, the "top" and the "tail" — as it were, give permission, for jocular and playfulness to be allowed for a while, until the main business is resumed. And playing in this way, manifestly for an audio-visual recording (as Zoe's noticing of the camera's status as "on" in line 20 alerts us), might easily occasion a kind of everyday comic art: mocking up a scene from elsewhere such as a mutually known novel or film. And so much so given that Lyn and Zoe are showing an acute awareness of this event being, in itself, a film!

As a cultural given, side sequences can accomplish just this kind of business. (That is, we could imagine a society where they were quite otherwise — e.g., they would always refer to members' deities and nothing else.) And, equally as a cultural given, they can accomplish mutual references to 'extrinsic' texts. Then, especially because the *Fagin* reference is neither pre-faced nor post-faced with an explanation or a request for one, we can hear it that Lyn and Zoe are orienting to a mutually known, just-this — not some general — shabby person. It's Dickens's

Fagin (whether from the novel, the musical or, more likely, from the Alec Guinness film incarnation) that is being very specifically alluded to. The allusion is a matter of mutual cultural knowledge — just as the use of the side sequence itself is such a matter. The symmetry between the two is remarkable. To return to a well-known EM noticing, speakers design their utterances for recipients who have bits of cultural knowledge in common with them. As Sacks puts it, with respect to perhaps the most intimate of such speakers (spouses): '*A speaker should, on producing the talk he does, orient to his recipient*' (1992b:438; his italics).

The question then is: where do the boundaries of what might be called cultural information lie? Do they stop at what can be analytically inferred from the transcribed text of the talk 'itself'? Or do they include the EM dictum that members should never be assumed to be cultural dopes? If the latter, then we would not be surprised if speakers could mutually signal the business at hand (here: filming "everyday life"; finding and sharing cigarettes) as 'on hold' for a short period while they engage in personal banter: jocular or playful talk around a fairly-well established cultural icon of shabbiness: Charles Dickens's Fagin — is there another? — and his multi-textual avatars, including Charles's nominee Ron Moody, but also Alec Guinness and, shortly to come, as we write, Ben Kingsley. If we, as analysts, have this from both the strictly local context (the transcript) and also from a just-slightly supra-local context signed off by the speakers themselves as a side sequence, then why not bring *both* into play? After all, the word *Fagin* is already part of the ordinary language, in perfect logical order as it stands and without need of embellishment — as no less than Wittgenstein would have it. *Chambers*, for example, gives us the following entry for *Fagin* (with a capital letter): "a person who trains young thieves, receives stolen goods, etc. [Character in Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*]". In the ordinary language, today, there is not just 'Fagin' but '*a Fagin*', just as there is '*a Lothario*', '*a Casanova*', '*a Scrooge*' and so forth...

...but how far can such contextual information go? There may be an indefinite number of predicates attachable to *Fagin*. And, as one of the reviewers of this paper kindly reminds us, a strong candidate is ‘... is a Jew’. Is this either a permissible or a useful contextual consideration, given that we have argued that context can be available for analysts if and only if it is empirically available for the actual speakers themselves? The answer would seem to be a definite ‘no’. The only significant predicate — from the indefinite array — for the speakers themselves, is something like ‘has gloves with the tips cut out’. Jewishness is a contextual matter that is clearly out of the question on these criteria. Dickens himself may have had ‘anti-semitic’ motives when constructing the character of Fagin: but these speakers are *manifestly* not repeating anything of the sort. Perhaps we can now see, at least to some extent, where the limits of context lie?

So, when Sacks referred to ‘purely’ conversational knowledge, he referred to it as a *cultural* machinery. Does that culture stop with what we can find on the surface of a transcript — in which case CA becomes a mere variant of New Criticism transferred from the text of the poem to the text of the transcript? If so, a computer algorithm yet-to-come would be able to generate every possible analysis. Or is the line between culture (as local-textual context) and culture (as audio-visually participant-placed supra-local context) more blurred than a certain kind of purism would prefer? Our suggested (and slight) blurring allows many things into the conversation-analytic mentality as Schenkein (1978) once described it: but not everything. It specifically contests analytic inferences to individual speakers’ ‘mental contents’; but it also allows ‘short-cut’, but certainly not “promiscuous” (cf. Schegloff, 1992) cultural inferences where both analysts and participants can be shown, empirically, to depend on them. To say *Fagin* is to say something. And we all, as speakers of the language, have at least a general idea of what *that* (specifically) is — and it’s the same with other *ordinary* words like “you”, “look” and “like” (Antaki, 1998: 80). Here we both agree and disagree with Charles.

... we have to lead up to it as it comes, as did the participants (Antaki, 1998: 80)

Furthemore, to say one doesn't *need* to know that *Fagin* is the name of a character in *Oliver Twist* in order to understand that the speech particle is a proper name or identity ascription is, surely, not really the substantive point. The utterance already contains this information grammatically (we do not have "you look like *a* Fagin"). And of course one does not *need* to know the 'contextual' details of Fagin's dress sense (although, as we have seen, Lyn and Zoe make their extensive shared knowledge of this quite explicit), his relation to the Artful Dodger, Nancy or Bill Sykes, the particulars of his ethnicity or occupation or even that he was the entirely fictional invention of Charles Dickens, to make (some) sense of Zoe's utterance.¹⁰ But *without* this shared knowledge would we see the laughter sequentially prefacing and following (indeed latched to) the ascription? That is to say, in and through their co-produced laughter, Zoe and Lyn show to us, as on-looking analysts, that a shared knowledge of Dickens is utterly pertinent contextual information *for the members in the interaction at hand*. In this respect then, while one might indeed glean the information that *Fagin* is an identity referential term, and a humorous one to boot, *sans* 'context', the jocular identity ascription will be understood to be one, but the specifics of the joke, and indeed the meaning of the reference to a very particular type of glove, will not be easily got without it – if at all.

That is, the fact, to repeat, that the term *Fagin* passes without an immediately following question ("Who?") displays mutual recognition within a biographical-cultural domain. Ditto the fact that it is not prefaced by an explanation ("You look

¹⁰ In a context rather remote from the current analysis, we note that the term "need" is also a slippery one. That is to say, in human services, persons may routinely be described as "needing" the services of a counsellor or psychologist. We note that whilst people may well be helped by psychological care or by talking to an impartial other, to say that they "need" a psychologist can be too strong. Humans all need to eat. No-one "needs" a Big Mac.

like a guy I was reading about in Dickens — or saw in the film/musical of the novel — who wears those sort of gloves. He was called Fagin".) Mother and daughter mutually and publicly display that they have supra-local (con)text(s) in common as members of a cultural order (readers of the English classics, family members with knowledge of each other's reading or viewing habits, and so on), precisely by *neither* post-questioning *nor* pre-explaining the term in question. The *purely sequential pertinent absence* of such markers shows that something else — loosely 'contextual knowledge' — is in play, just here, in this local sequential scene, as videotaped and transcribed. The specific sequence tells us that 'our', 'for here and now', 'local' context is in play and vice versa. As analysts, we might start from either end (or indeed from both ends) of this local array of cultural objects (utterances including allusions).

When Sacks refers to the *conversational* machinery that ordinary speakers and hearers rely on in order to both produce and recognise particular utterances, he is careful to identify it as, equally, both a cultural *and* a sequential machinery. The two need not, of necessity, preclude each other. Sometimes the sequential information alone will be the methodological key to what is transpiring in a passage of talk. Sometimes the burden can be carried by *equally* locally obvious displays of contextual knowledge on the part of the participants. Sometimes both. We can see no in-principle methodological reason for ignoring one or the other. The materials, *including* the locally displayed (if, strictly on the surface of the transcript, unspoken) contextual materials, must determine the methodological stance we take. Hence, the luxury of context.

3. Charles (not Dickens) responds

It's the lucky hack who has his work picked up and scrutinised with such verve and brio as do Alec McHoul and Mark Rapley. I'll respond with what I think is the main point at issue between us (though there is, fundamentally, more agreement than disagreement in how we see the analytical world).

First, a point of agreement, and an example of the sort of analytical bonus that CA folk say you get when colleagues look over published transcripts. McHoul and Rapley add value by noticing that there is a line of business I hadn't seen before: they point out that Zoe's enquiring where the cigarettes are, then fetching them, then offering Lyn one, forms a frame. I was concentrating on the tease, which McHoul and Rapley rightly point out is something like a side-sequence in the frame that Zoe implicitly opens, when she comes in and looks around for the cigarettes, and closes, when she fetches the packet back from the kitchen. Now as it happens, I don't think the frame is what licences Lyn and Zoe to be jocular (nor does it provide evidence that they are so; that comes from the laughter), but one could set off on a project to see if side-sequences turn out to be environments which allow or privilege jokes and teasing. It's possible, and an intriguing line of further work. But, anyway, for our purposes here: so far so good.

There is trouble, though, in what McHoul and Rapley find me doing with 'context' (and the trouble could have been found with any CA-minded person; the analysis in Antaki (1998) being, I hope, a straight exposition of general principles as articulated in founders' writings; the most combative, perhaps, being Emanuel Schegloff's series of articles (Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999a,b) in debate with Margaret Wetherell (1998) and Michael Billig (1999a,b).

I claimed that Lyn and Zoe's treatment of the lexical item *Fagin* showed us all that we needed to know. I didn't quite say so, but I implied that it was shaped by its immediate local sequential terrain and, by being set up as a new feature in the landscape, it left a new geography for the participants to navigate. In Heritage's useful phrase, it was context-shaped and context-renewing. McHoul and Rapley object that I was nevertheless relying (unconsciously) on other clues to what it meant and what it was doing, viz:

(a) I was underplaying the fact that *Fagin* is an allusion to "mutual cultural knowledge" (which I share with Lyn and Zoe);

(c) I was oblivious to the fact that when both Lyn and Zoe laugh, it “show(s) us ... that a shared knowledge of Dickens is utterly pertinent contextual information for the members in the interaction at hand”.

I think both of those observations are wrong. The phrase ‘mutual knowledge’ is a useful shorthand, to be sure, but it is also a short-circuit. To explain what two people do by virtue of their mutual knowledge is circular (*they did X because they shared this bit of knowledge; we know they share it because they did X*). Certainly Lyn and Zoe act as if they agree, momentarily, that what Lyn says is funny. What does it add to say that they do so *because* they both know who Fagin is (or still less, that they have a ‘shared knowledge of Dickens’)? I’m not cavilling at the word *because*; I could equally say: what does it add to the statement ‘they laugh because Zoe sets up something which she delivers as a joke or tease, in which the term *Fagin* seems to have a natural place’? We don’t know for sure whether Zoe has ever in her life even heard of Fagin, or knows he was invented by Dickens.

Certainly there is something of her laugh (when it comes) that does seem to signal recognition — but, of course, one could (and, for the sake of epistemological propriety, should) simply stop there, and say just that: it *signals* recognition. Lyn may have reason to treat it as actual recognition — I mean the kind which commits Zoe to knowing about Fagin, if asked — but Lyn’s interests aren’t ours, and her epistemological criteria are different. Lyn might intend to see how much Zoe knows about Dickens, Ron Moody, Alec Guinness, the Artful Dodger and the rest of the crew; we don’t (until and unless Lyn makes her intention visible).

I’m sure it’s happened to all of us that, in the company of people speaking about things we’re not familiar with, or perhaps in a language we don’t fully understand, we hear someone make what we work out (from their delivery and demeanour) to be a joke; and we laugh. If we are careful about timing, the observer can’t tell if we’ve got the joke or not: we laugh appropriately. For the observer’s view, we ‘share cultural knowledge’ with our friends, but the observer

may have got it wrong. I think Alec and Mark have got it wrong here, for the same reason. We can make a good fist of seeing what Lyn and Zoe are up to, without either invoking shared knowledge to explain it, nor working back and taking what they're up to as evidence for shared knowledge.

In one of the showstopping numbers in the musical "Oliver", Fagin instructs his boys that "you gotta pick a pocket or two". You've got to slip your hand into a hidden place, pull out a valuable, and make off with it for your own profit. I'm worried that, in Alec McHoul and Mark Rapley's lively argument, their appeal to 'contextual knowledge' might just be read as an endorsement of slipping into a hidden place (the participants' minds), stealing a valuable (their shared contextual knowledge), and making off with it for our profit (explicating what they are up to). Artful: but it dodges the epistemological issue.

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